

# The Long Run #3: John Wolseley on revealing landscapes for 60 years

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JOHN WOLSELEY [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]

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TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

Hello and welcome to the Art Guide Australia podcast with Tiarney Miekus. This is the third episode in our series The Long Run, which looks at creating and evolving, where I talk with artists who have each had careers spending 60 years. This episode is with John Wolseley.

Currently working from regional Victoria, John is one of Australia's most well-known landscape painters and printmakers. Moving to Australia from England in 1976, he's known for immersing himself in an environment before painting it, capturing landscapes ranging from the mountains in Tasmania to wetlands and rivers, to the floodplains of Arnhem land. In this conversation, John and I talk about his childhood and youth and how he came of age when England was coming out of World War II. We also talk about what it takes for a landscape to capture his attention, and how he balances an environmental awareness in his work without being too didactic. And finally, John tells us what changes and what doesn't change over a 60-year practice, and whether he feels optimistic about the future. And before we hear from John, a very big thank you to our sponsor for this series Leonard Joel Auctioneers and Valuers, based in Melbourne and Sydney.

TM

You would have come of age at a time in England when the country was just coming out of world war two. What was that upbringing like? And was there time and space for art at that moment?

JW

I can't remember! No, I'm being silly. But it was 80 years ago. So yes, being in the garden on the farm where I was brought up and hearing the bombers that had dropped bombs on London, returning to Germany overhead. Back then, when I was seven years old, I was sent to a school right on the other side of England. My mother died when I was five. I was sent to this terrible prep school, which was actually later closed down because of cruelty to the boys. So when I was there, I longed for the woods, and ponds, and streams. And so I'd say that I've spent the last 60 years yearning for that secret landscape, the one I'd been torn away from. So that, that lost domain, that place was where my mother's family lived since 1150. So there, I was stuck there with my father who was a painter. And so I just started off painting when I was ever so small to try and impress him. I was also drawing all the, the actual marvelous lolloping hills and it was on the edge Exmore, and all the snakes and reptiles and insects. And I haven't stopped.

TM

You spoke of an interview once of your mum passing and how that left you free to wander through the hills and the meadows and the forest. And you said, "I sort of learnt to work within nature where I was this funny little boy who almost became a lizard or a fox." And I mean, it sounds kind of amusing and idyllic, but it also sounds kind of lonely.

JW

Yes. I suppose it was. My father employed about 29 different carers or nannies. So I was quite lonely in the sense that I was running away from them. But I suppose it's just there that I'm making contact with the actual—the nature of the place. I think it was those times as a little boy moving within the natural world, that's what my painting is really about.

TM

So those kinds of reflections, I feel like maybe they're the kinds of reflections that are easier to have with time and distance. But was it something that you were aware of when you were younger?

JW

Yes. Yes. I was. When I got to Australia and spending an awful lot of time wandering amongst the dunes of Simpson Desert, or up in Arnhem Land. And in a sort of funny way I was looking for the same kinds of landscape—or I knew how to negotiate myself in the landscape. Yes. So what you say about time in relationship to this is... that's very interesting. I think this relates to what I went on to do when I grew up was that that farm we turned into a kind of hippie commune. A commune of artists and musicians and sort of permaculture sort of farming. So I continued working within landscape. Then I do the sort of mad things. Like I'd plow a whole field and then at five o'clock in the afternoon, I'd paint the meadows that I plowed.

TM

You know, I was going to ask you if being an artist seemed like an impossible thing in the 1950s, but I suppose with your dad being a painter, you had some kind of role model there in your life already?

JW

Yes. I suppose with some of these podcasts, you are asking aren't you what art there was in the house when they were children?

TM

Yes.

JW

A lot of artists I know often say there was actually nothing. There might not even have been a bloody book.

TM

No, that's actually that's the more common answer. Yeah.

JW

Yes, yes. What was good for me was that my father had been a painter all his life. And he had me when he was quite old, and so he had lots of paintings by his friends and the Zabel artists in what was called the Newlands school in Cornwall, pretty fabulous artists. So I see all that, and then I see all his paintings. But the disadvantage of that—well, the advantage was that I really learned an awful lot about that kind of figurative painting. But the disadvantage was that my father, when I started to be more experimental—well, he was an alcoholic as well, and he would look across the table at me and he'd say, "How could a son of mine paint that horrible, modern rubbish." That went on for some amount of time, then I actually did run off and do printmaking and etching in Paris for two years, to get away to get away from him.

TM

When you studied in Paris and even when you studied in England, you studied at some quite prestigious schools and you must've shown such great technical talent when you were young, I imagine?

JW

I sometimes wonder about that. It's quite funny, isn't it? I think that the intriguing thing is that artists who have got great technical gifts, as Picasso says he had, sometimes it's a disadvantage. But it's quite true that the art schools in those days, like St Martins art school, or The Bryin Shaw school I went to. One did learn to draw and become very expert.

TM

And you would have been studying and painting largely for most of your life I guess, at a time when the art world really did centre conceptual art above everything else. Did that make you feel self-conscious that you were a landscape painter?

JW

I think the answer is yes, but another answer is that in England then, painting land itself did become rather conceptualist. A lot of my friends stopped calling themselves landscape painters, and they said they were land artists. All those arty communes that I've been talking about, and things like permaculture, and then the land artists like Richard Long came through—it was around then that I commenced doing big projects, which involved painting single paintings, but they were also installations, which were like... The first one I did. The exhibition is called A journey down the Durabodboi River in a collapsible boat. Moving away from being conceptual, and it was that time that I kept on telling people that I wasn't a landscape artist, and I was an 'Inscape artist'. So when I got to Australia in 1976, I was surprised to find that painting land was considered pretty passe. You know, the idea that you might be painting a landscape, you're regarded as being very old fashioned. But it was quite funny coming here in '76, because at the same time as landscape painting was

considered passe, the greatest painters of land that Australia has produced—the Aboriginal artists—were not appreciated or bought by Australians either. You know, this was the time of Papunya and Geoffrey Barton. And I was up there at that time, and so it was just completely amazing to me that those paintings were all bought by Americans and European buyers.

TM

Yeah. You just didn't feel like Australians showed too much interest in the landscape at that time?

JW

No they don't. Actually, there's a rather nice article about John Nixon, the artist who sadly passed away, in the paper last weekend by Doug Hall. And he makes the point that people like John Nixon painted non-figurative, exciting paintings almost as a revolt against the fact that landscape painting in Australia is really where rather a lot of people who'd been rather good—like Boyd or all those—but who were now doing rather weak work. That was interesting.

TM

Yeah, it is interesting. And I think it's also interesting that you moved to Australia in 1976 at a time when so many artists were fleeing the country. Like I know John Nixon went and spent a bit of time in England. So I'm curious why you made the move to Australia?

JW

I've got about four answers to that, and I've actually almost forgotten. People always ask me that. But I suppose the main reason was that the land and the earth and the ecology in England was so damaged, the extent to which insects and reptiles are becoming extinct, and that the industrial farming was having such an appalling effect, is that I wanted to go to a country where I could see the landscape and I could see the in-scape or in-stress of the landscape. And so when I got here and I shot off pretty early up to the centre and to the north, you could actually see the bones of the landscape. And you could see ecologies which were firing away.

TM

And you often immerse yourself in an environment or landscape and you get to know it before painting it. What does it take for a certain landscape to captivate you enough to paint it?

JW

That's a difficult one. I think that I find all bits of land totally fascinating, but I think what captivates me is: how can I understand it, and how can I make it work? An example of this might be that I spent nine years doing work up at the Buku-Larrnggay art centre in East Arnhem Land. And a lot of it's been with... Some of it has been working on the same things as Mulkun Wirrpanda the great ceremonial leader and artist. It all started when we did—she started painting all the edible plants. And what was so wonderful was that I'd be trying to do the same thing. I suppose a way of answering your question would be to say that there, I was watching how she engaged with the landscape and how she painted it.

TM

You said you see yourself as a hybrid mix of artist and scientist. What did you mean by that?

JW

I suppose the best way of describing that would be to go back to where I did my training, as it were, in Paris in 1959, 60, 61. Because where I was, was the printmaking atelier set up by Stanley Hayter and he printed for all the surrealists. And so when I was there, wonderful things would happen. Like he'd say, "Oh, well, I'd like you to paint, help me... There's a Spanish artist coming in this weekend, and would you help me?" And so Miró would turn up. I didn't know he was Miro. I helped him and things like that. And then Max Ernst. And I actually heard, Hayter and Max Ernst talking about how Max Ernst first invented frottage. But the, the main thing about Hayter was that he was a scientist. And the way he taught us was a lot about how materials work in a scientific way, as well as in a image making way. I then went back to England and studied agriculture. And I came first in the land use and drafts and management scientific bit. And then I suppose I went on being quite scientific in the way that I was painting the... all of these insects and land forms and geology. And got into the habit of buying lots of books, and being a rather faux-scientist.

TM

There's such great environmental awareness in your work, and I wonder does that

stem from an empathy with nature or a curiosity or wonder? And then how do you kind of conceive of that relationship between the artist and the landscape?

JW

I think that one way of answering that might be to go back to when I was living on that commune. And I was very much influenced, as so many of us were back then, by Eastern mysticism and eastern thought. My approach to landscape has always been far more influenced by the great Chinese landscape artists. There was the kind of thing that I would be studying artists like, all of the great thinkers, like Lao Tzu. And painting landscape then, and lots of us who were so affected by them—I mean, I'm thinking of Ian Fairweather or Tobey or Greaves who described painting as meditation, even as prayer. So I'm here going a long way aren't I from the English landscape tradition. So that the things like, I'm trying to remember, it was the wonderful Chuang Tzu. He said something like, "When the mind is in repose in meditation, it becomes a mirror of the universe." I take all that in and he was also, he would describe, this was a nice phrase he had, he described the artist as a person who takes off his clothes and sits cross-legged.

JW

So later I did an awful lot of that. But I think absolutely, primarily, this kind of thing was central to Cezanne. See, when I was 20 to 30, Cezanne was our god. And now I look back on it now and I read those kinds of things he says, I realise how far away most artists have gone from the idea that by looking at nature, you were trying to reveal things like the Dao or the way of nature, or the things like cosmic principles. So that when dear old Cezanne wrote the truth is in nature, and I shall prove it. That time we all absolutely took that on. And what fascinates me now is that very few artists actually do think they can do something as important as that. You know, how many artists have said to you, "I tell you Tiarney, the truth is in nature. And I shall prove it!"

TM

I mean, you know, not many people say that, but I feel like... Is that kind of the fantasy or the belief that you have to have to be able to put paint on a material?

JW

No, I don't think you have to have it to put paint on the material. And I would say that vast numbers—talking about easel painting—vast number of artists are putting a lot of paint on material, but they simply do not have the belief that what they're doing is very, very important. Where I come from, is that the artists I really admire, let's say Cezanne. Or let's say, Turner. Seems to me, that Turner as a landscape artist has actually shown the world, revealed to the world the power of nature and the importance of nature in the most incredible way. Like, artists have taught us how to look and understand where we are. You see where I'm finding it so engaging is to find that artists don't actually believe you can do that. It's best to what I think that artists who paint landscape are concerned with now, and that is that we are terribly, terribly important because we can actually show people how nature works. How the great flow of nature works and how if it doesn't work and we mess it up so much, that it'll all collapse. See, we funny artists out there in the bush, we can actually see that global warming is a lot worse than any of us thought, even a year ago. And the fact that the powers that be are doing nothing about it is just so devastating. Yeah, yeah, I'm having a rant, aren't I?

TM

I get that sense of taking what you do so importantly, but is there a risk sometimes, especially when, you know, there is an ecological concern in the work, do you ever get worried about being didactic in the work? And is that something you have to curb in the painting?

JW

Oh, I've spent a huge amount of time worrying about that. Because the fascinating thing is that the artists who do work about climate change, it's absolutely fascinating how, when you look at the paintings, you sense, that you are being preached at and you've already got rather a lot of echo fatigue. And you have a job looking at the painting to see whether the painting is saying things about the really deep down important things which art can do. And so I've actually stopped being as dejected, because I was—I did huge number amounts of work, trying to stop people felling the growth forest and various things. And now what I like to say is that all an artist can do and should do is try and reveal, and show the power of nature and how it works. And that at least might go some way to help people to actually see what's happening.

TM

And when you are trying to do that, you're known as being quite theatric and a bit of a storyteller. Do you find that those aspects of your personality help with the painting?

JW

Yes, I think so. I think that the performative aspect of art is pretty fascinating, isn't it? But especially now when people don't see your paintings, or not very often, and especially now with Covid, I think that it really is important for artists to beguile and excite the public. Yes.

TM

I suppose there must be a fine balance between exciting people and then sort of not having to feel like your degrading your painting just simply to excitement.

JW

Yes. Yes. And that's the same too, as a good artist must try not to paint paintings in order to sell them or in order to be liked. But I do have quite a strong remnant of my socialist upbringing in that I actually do feel that artists should be revealing and telling people the deep down truths that I've been muttering on about rather than painting, trying to be more and more avant-garde. It seems to me that the art schools are so often training students to be absolutely cutting edge and push on, we've got to the stage where modern art has lost its public to such a large degree. It seems to be such a problem. I do think so many artists are sort of showing off and trying to please their peers, and they don't actually spend enough time seeing how many people do respond to what they do. Not that they should paint in order to impress the general public. I'd like to give an example of that. Up here here in the forest I've been painting a lot of paintings and drawings about the beetle tracks and the tracks of different laves in wood under the bark. So I've been doing lots and lots of paintings in which I have made rubbings of these. Now when my friend who delivers the wood—he comes in and I show him all the paintings I've done by rubbing his lots of wood. He simply loves it, and all that kind of work, which is actually based on real nature, my neighbours here all like. Do you know where I'm going? I'm not saying that we should all be social realists in the Chinese style.

TM

No. That makes sense. I have one final question because I know I've kept you for quite a while. And it's a question I put to both Gareth Sansom and Wendy Stavrianos. And it was that when you have a practice of 60 years, does your approach or ideas change as the decades change, or do some things really remain quite fundamental?

JW

I sometimes do think of that, because I do think an awful lot of artists of my age have got stuck quite a long way, way back. I remember Marc Chagall saying somewhere—I'm not name-dropping. But I did see him in a cafe once. But Chagall said something like old artists should be careful not to let moss grow on them. It was more like we must be careful not to let one's work be covered with moss. And somebody said to me, I think it... Actually, they didn't say it to me. Picasso said...

TM

That would be nice.

JW

I did shake hands with Picasso by the way. But that's a different story. But Picasso said a good artist is someone who lives and works rather like they were following a tree. And so they start at the bottom and they go up the trunk and then they go off on a branch. And they go right to the end of the branch, but do really interesting work following that kind of branch of approach. But then they, what they've got to do is they must go back to the main trunk and then go off on another branch and then repeat it. But it seemed to me that that's a nice metaphor, for me, is a nice metaphor for how I feel I have done. And so now for instance, I'm quite a long way up that tree trunk, and I'm now going off on another branch, which is actually to do a lot more actual oil painting. And that's been rather extraordinary because I find I'm doing things which have a relation to the branches right long way down. So that I'm doing some of these painting I'm doing for Earth Canvas, this show in Aubrey really do have a strange synchrony with the ones that I did 60 years ago.

TM

So that process of intuitively adapting and changing, and with your environmental concern, and I guess coupled with the fact that the world has changed a lot since

when you first started and the environmental circumstances do feel more dire now. Does that leave you... do you feel optimistic as an artist?

JW

I think it has actually. We in-scape, that whole process of ageing has changed in the last 10 years. I mean, when you say, does it make me feel optimistic—the way I've been doing things, I think it's changed in that I now look at on the landscape we're talking in now, or I'm talking to you and I can see the way it's changing far faster than we ever thought. So that when I first came here 40 years ago, I often used to think, "Oh those early other white people who went in and painted. I used to think they were finding the first example of this animal. And that reptile. And then here was I, then in 1976 and since, painting the last one. Like I've got a collection of butterflies I made early on in Europe. And quite a lot of them are now extinct. So in answer to your question, it really is very different. So we in-scape artists are hitting or coming across something which is completely weird. And one can't feel very optimistic about it.

TM

Right. So in terms of, I guess not to be dramatic, but the future of the world, you don't feel optimistic?

JW

Well, I was having completely wicked thoughts this morning when I walked through the forest towards my studio. The spring flowers are coming out, just a mass of gorgeous, and then I was thinking of all the terribly sad things that are happening with Covid and the rest of the world. And then I was thinking, well, perhaps I am feeling optimistic, or these flowers make me feel optimistic, that this great surge and symphony of nature will go on. But we humans have probably ruined our place in it and are going to almost die out. But I'm sort of excited that the rest of the natural world will go on. Do you know what I'm trying to say? What's happening now is appalling from the point of view of us human beings, but for the rest of the creatures that live on this earth, I am optimistic that that'll go on.

TM [CONCLUSION]

And that was John Wolseley for the third episode of The Long Run. You can listen back to the first episode with Gareth Sansom and the second with Wendy Stavrianos. You can also subscribe to the Art Guide podcast on iTunes and Spotify, or otherwise listen at Art Guide online, where you can keep up to date with art related news articles and features from across the country.